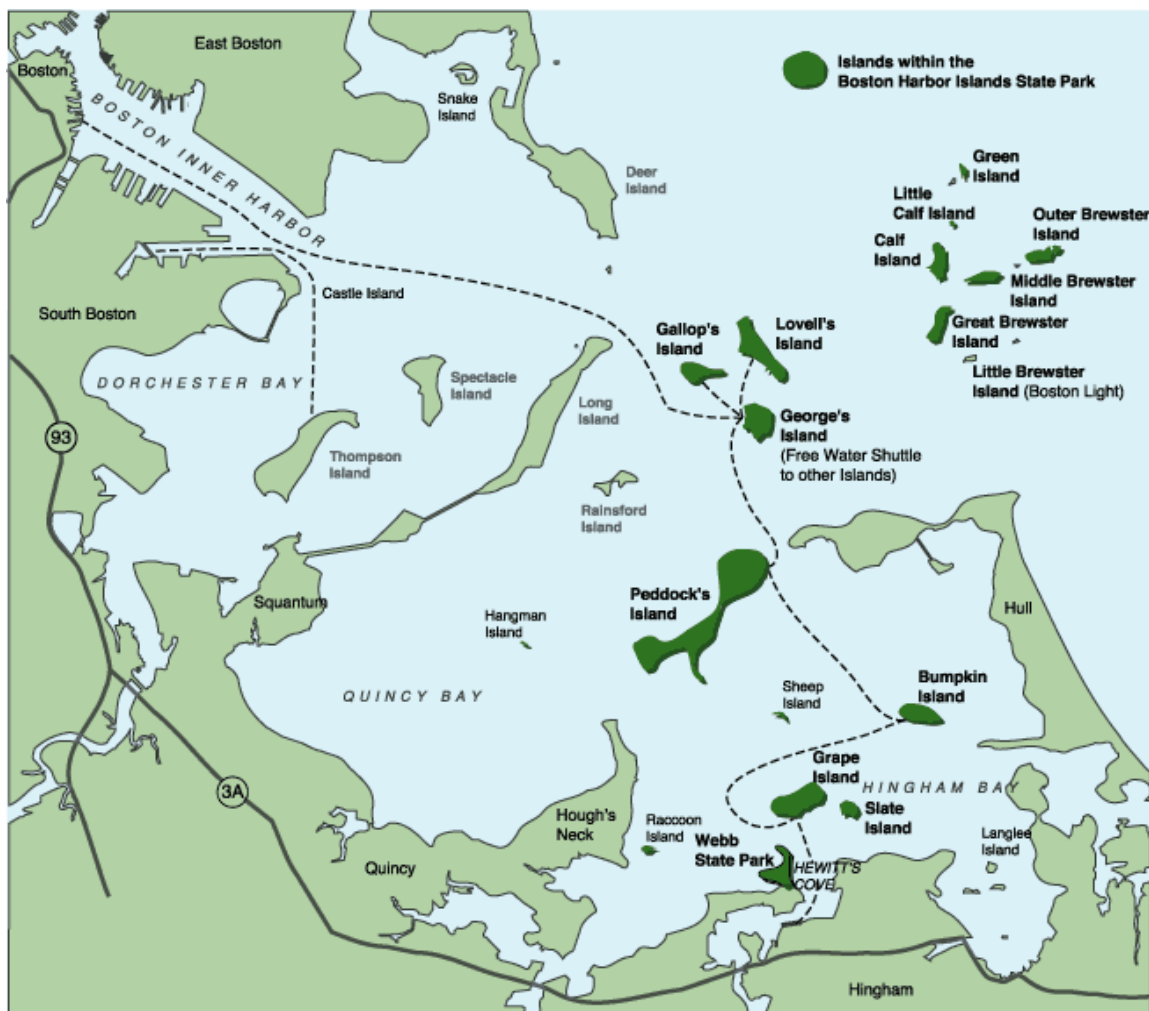




Planning Through Partnerships

Alternative Transportation at Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area



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Planning and Alternative Transportation Partnerships

Partnerships are an increasingly important part of transportation planning within the National Park Service (NPS). Many parks now collaborate on a regular basis with a wide range of partners, including neighboring communities, area businesses, non-profit organizations, and local and state government agencies in order to develop transportation plans. By contributing diverse strengths, partners make it possible to create a broad network of institutional, organizational, and financial support for park-based transportation projects.

Boston Harbor Islands: A Transportation Success Story

This case study tells the story of a successful and collaborative transportation planning process at Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area (Boston Harbor Islands). By using an innovative approach to planning, Boston Harbor Islands has been able to secure political and financial support for its transportation needs. Rather than hiring an outside consultant to develop a transportation plan for the park, Boston Harbor Islands used planning funds from the NPS Alternative Transportation Program to work hand-in-hand with the partners of the park—non-profit institutions, advocacy organizations, and municipal and state agencies—to create a vision for transportation at the park that all of the participants could embrace.

This process, which was coordinated by the U.S. Department of Transportation Volpe National Transportation Systems Center (Volpe Center)—a federal research center with extensive experience in transportation planning for NPS units—was participatory, inclusive, and comprehensive, and served to strengthen the partnerships already in place between NPS and the other park stakeholders.

The park and its partners, acting collaboratively, have been able to use the unified transportation vision articulated through the planning process to:

- Advocate for the transportation needs of the park with government agencies, non-profit organizations, the media, and the general public.
- Receive political support from the Massachusetts congressional delegation to help meet the long-term transportation and accessibility goals of the park.
- Implement needed transportation improvements, following an established list of priorities, as funding has become available.
- Receive approval from the NPS Development Advisory Board for the entirety of the new transportation facilities proposed for the park.
- Secure over \$400,000 in funding from the NPS rehabilitation and repair program to make improvements to aging transportation infrastructure within the park.
- Secure \$2.25 million in funding through the congressional appropriations process to install dock facilities within the park that are accessible for individuals with disabilities.

Lessons Learned from Boston Harbor Islands

Boston Harbor Islands has been successful in gaining political and financial support for its transportation needs by using planning techniques and partnerships that differ from the typical methods. With assistance from the Volpe Center, park staff and partners were intimately involved in the process of developing the transportation plan, one that ultimately gained the unanimous

support of all of the participants. Volpe Center involvement was an essential success factor in that it provided unbiased expertise to the park and other stakeholders.

From this collaborative, consensus- oriented approach can be gleaned a set of lessons to share with other parks:

- **Lesson No. 1: Collaboration is crucial and will provide long- term benefits**
Technique: Assemble an inclusive group of committed partners representing the major park interests and involve them, from the very beginning, in every step of the transportation planning process.
Outcome: A transportation vision that receives the support of all park partners.
- **Lesson No. 2: Work with transportation experts who are knowledgeable, credible, and can bring diverse skills to the planning process**
Technique: Seek out interdisciplinary skills in mediation, public involvement, and conflict resolution, as well as transportation planning and engineering expertise, to contribute to the successful development of a transportation plan.
Outcome: A final document that has credibility, authority, and long- term value.
- **Lesson No. 3: Develop a framework for managing the planning process in an efficient and participatory way**
Technique: Before the commencement of the planning process, establish the ground rules for the effort. Who will be involved and in what ways? How long will the process take? What are the desired outcomes? How will the final product be used? Who is in charge of the process and how will the participants work together?
Outcome: A planning process that has buy- in from all participants
- **Lesson No. 4: Transportation plans should be comprehensive, forward- looking, and phased**
Technique: Use the planning process to identify (1) a clearly defined set of long- term transportation needs and (2) the means and resources to realistically address those needs.
Outcome: A fully developed plan that is economical, flexible, and implementable.
- **Lesson No. 5: Park- based transportation planning should complement transportation planning underway outside of the park**
Technique: Recognize the transportation needs and priorities of the communities neighboring the park, and incorporate park transportation planning with existing efforts.
Outcome: A park- based transportation plan that is well- integrated with regional transportation considerations and that may be eligible for funding outside NPS.

The experience of Boston Harbor Islands demonstrates that a well- developed transportation plan, with clarity of purpose and strong backing from a range of stakeholders, can be a powerful tool for garnering support for the implementation of needed transportation programs. Any NPS unit considering the development of new transportation facilities can use the lessons provided by Boston Harbor Islands to:

- Improve their planning processes
- Improve their relationships with partners by providing products that support partner priorities and serve visitor needs
- Improve their approach to identifying and requesting sources of funding
- Improve their approach to receiving project approval within NPS

The Park

Established by Congress in 1996, Boston Harbor Islands is composed of 34 islands, covering an area of 50 square miles and a diversity of natural, cultural, and educational resources. The islands feature structures, including military fortifications and visitor facilities, as well as walking trails and opportunities to view wildlife and diverse natural landscapes. NPS, though not an owner of any of the land or structures within the park, is authorized to spend appropriated funds for the care of park facilities, which are managed in accordance with NPS laws and standards. The Boston Harbor Islands Partnership, whose members are appointed by the Secretaries of the U.S. Departments of Interior and Homeland Security, coordinates both the day- to- day and long-term management of park resources.

NPS works in conjunction with the other members of the Partnership to secure funding for the park, to develop educational and recreational programs, to manage the distribution of information, and to support special events at the park.

Members of the Boston Harbor Islands Partnership

Boston Harbor Islands Advisory Council
Boston Office of Environmental Services
Boston Redevelopment Authority
Island Alliance
Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation
Massachusetts Port Authority
Massachusetts Water Resources Authority
National Park Service
Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center
Trustees of Reservation
U.S. Coast Guard

The Problem

While several of the harbor islands are connected to the mainland by land causeways, most require transportation by water. At the time the park was established, many of the islands had existing facilities for water access—including docks, piers, and ramps—but visitor access was restricted due to the unsatisfactory condition of many of the facilities. Not only were they old (most had been constructed in the 1970s and 1980s) but many had experienced structural deterioration from prolonged exposure to the marine environment. The sub- standard conditions of the landside facilities presented challenges for the new park, which was congressionally mandated to improve public access by water and which anticipated growing visitation.

The deficiency of the installed docks and ramps was particularly marked with regard to accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Due to the considerable tides common to Boston Harbor (between 10–12 feet, on average), dock and ramp facilities have typically been designed to float with the fluctuations of the ocean, requiring passengers at some tides to navigate steeply sloped ramps on their way from vessel to shore. This situation is impractical for many individuals, including the elderly, those using wheelchairs, and those with difficulties walking. For these reasons, the replacement of the existing docks with a new design that could serve visitors with disabilities has been a priority for the park.

In addition to constructing new docks, the improvement of water transportation to Boston Harbor Islands also required the creation of a network of stops, routes, and landside gateways that could effectively link the islands with the mainland and with each other. The identification of appropriate gateways for boats traveling to and from the harbor islands had begun with the legislation establishing the park, which suggested a number of possible gateways for future

development. The process of narrowing the list of potential gateways, and then connecting them through a system of efficient routes, required a comprehensive planning process capable of considering all of the transportation issues facing the new park as well as the concerns of the landside communities.

The Process

With financial and institutional support from the NPS Alternative Transportation Program (ATP), four Boston Harbor- oriented NPS units approached the Volpe Center for assistance in developing a plan for the expansion and improvement of water transportation in Boston Harbor. The four NPS units—Boston Harbor Islands, Boston National Historical Park, Adams National Historical Park, and Salem National Maritime Park—share a common historical and cultural connection to Boston Harbor and a common desire to encourage water transportation as a viable means of moving visitors between and among the parks and central Boston.

In approaching the Volpe Center for planning assistance, the four parks articulated a wish that their individual transportation needs be considered in conjunction with an analysis of the common needs connecting the four parks. This dual character of the planning process was of particular importance to Boston Harbor Islands, which was at work on its first general management plan during the period of the transportation planning project. Additionally, the Volpe Center, as an independent and objective party, offered expertise in a range of important areas beyond the field of transportation planning, including public participation, consensus-building, and process facilitation “The expertise—and associated credibility—of the Volpe Center established an environment that led to solutions for issues from ferry routing to transportation economics to concepts of infrastructure design,” says George Price, Boston Harbor Islands Superintendent.

The planning effort began with a series of stakeholder meetings, facilitated by staff from the Volpe Center, designed to generate discussion of the issues associated with water transportation in Boston Harbor. These meetings provided a forum in which the many stakeholders involved with Boston Harbor Islands and the other Harbor- oriented parks could meet and talk, in a collegial atmosphere, in order to identify and prioritize the landside gateways and routes that would be the most appropriate. These issues had become controversial for the communities identified as potential gateways—each eager for the tourism revenue associated with being a gateway—but were key to the development of a water transportation plan for the NPS sites of Boston Harbor and, indeed, to the completion of the Boston Harbor Islands general management plan. Through the planning process, the stakeholders were able to develop a logical framework within which the attributes of each potential gateway and route could be evaluated.

In addition to providing a planning framework for judging potential routes and gateways, the process included the development of a design for a new type of dock to be used within the NPS sites of Boston Harbor. The new dock design meets the needs of disabled visitors, even with the tidal extremes of Boston Harbor, and is relatively inexpensive to construct and maintain. The dock design is one that can be installed with minimal modification at virtually all of the NPS docking sites within Boston Harbor, thereby greatly reducing the cost and complications of maintenance. Furthermore, Boston Harbor Islands and its partner parks may be able to contract for multiple docks simultaneously, thus making it possible for the unit cost of each dock to be lower than if the docks were designed and procured individually.

“A major success [of the planning process] was the creative solution for universal access to a variety of islands in the harbor, where tidal ranges are among the highest in the country. The final report clearly presents the findings and allows others to understand these complex issues, and support project funding.”

—George Price,
Boston Harbor Islands
Superintendent

A third element of the planning process included an evaluation of the market demand for water transportation to the NPS sites of Boston Harbor. This research work helped the Boston Harbor stakeholders to articulate—for themselves and for future park visitors—the ways in which water transportation is an integral component of, and can add to, the experience of visiting the NPS sites of Boston Harbor. The planning process also produced a series of specific recommendations for raising public awareness of the Boston Harbor NPS sites and the water transportation services available to them.

The planning process took nine months to complete. The final report, *Boston Harbor National Park Service Sites Alternative Transportation System Evaluation Report*, was released in June of 2001. Since its publication, the report has been used by Boston Harbor Islands and the other Boston Harbor- oriented NPS sites to apply for funding and other assistance for the development of water transportation facilities and services within Boston Harbor. As described in the next section, the findings of the report built on the strength of a collaborative, stakeholder- supported process and have proved to be a powerful tool in garnering support for the four NPS sites of Boston Harbor.

Results

Since the publication of the June 2001 report, a number of important events have advanced the development of water transportation within Boston Harbor. These include:

- The dock design developed during the planning process was approved by the NPS Development Advisory Board (DAB)—an NPS body responsible for evaluating the feasibility of capital construction projects—for construction within the Boston Harbor NPS units. The well- considered, comprehensive plan presented to the DAB—a plan to replace all of the needed docks within the park, with a priority ranking for each one—made it possible for the DAB to approve all of the dock facilities at once, thereby allowing them to be constructed as funding becomes available without need for further review and approval.
- The inclusion by Massachusetts Congressman William Delahunt of \$2.25 million for Boston Harbor Islands in the 2004 U.S. Department of Transportation appropriations bill. This funding, which will support the construction of new dock facilities based on the ADA-compliant design presented in the Volpe Center plan, was approved by President Bush in January of 2004.

Boston Harbor Islands is currently preparing requests for further NPS funding to support the construction of additional transportation infrastructure within the NPS sites of Boston Harbor.

The successes catalogued here are the result of the collaborative, multi- stakeholder planning process that was created to provide the foundation for the improvement and expansion of water transportation in Boston Harbor. Funded by the NPS Alternative Transportation Program, the planning process designed by the Volpe Center produced a document that has allowed Boston Harbor Islands and its partners to leverage the ATP planning investment to secure funding from multiple sources for the construction of transportation infrastructure. In this way, the planning support provided by the ATP has made possible the re- connection of the city of Boston with the islands and sites of Boston Harbor.